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ABSTRACT

Public attitudes toward bilingual education were explored in a survey of a national non-Hispanic sample of 1,570 individuals. Four issues were addressed: (1) the popular conception of bilingual education; (2) how informed the American public is about the bilingual education issue; (3) the level of public support or opposition to bilingual education; and (4) the underlying reasons for current public opinion, analyzed by comparing a symbolic politics approach with self-interest explanations. It was found that the public supports bilingual education, expresses definite attitudes about it, and thinks about it in many ways. A small minority saw it as an issue of cultural and linguistic maintenance, and when it was described in this way reactions were much less favorable, suggesting that public support is for programs that simply teach English to language minority children. Expressed attitudes were only minimally based on direct personal experiences, indicating the issue is more a symbolic one, with public reactions based on feelings toward Hispanics and government assistance to minorities generally. Attitudes toward bilingual education were more strongly linked to respondents' attitudes about language teaching in the schools than to stances on spending or general bilingualism. It is proposed that the symbolism of the issue may be crucial to its future in public educational policy. (MSE)

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Public Attitudes Toward Bilingual Education

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PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD BILINGUAL EDUCATION

Huddy, L., Cardoza, D. and Sears, D. O.

ABSTRACT

This study examines public attitudes toward bilingual education. A national non-Hispanic sample (N = 1570) was surveyed in order to examine (a) what the popular conception of bilingual education is, (b) to determine how informed the American public currently is about the bilingual education issue, (c) to assess public support or opposition to bilingual education, and (d) to explore the underlying reasons for current public opinion by comparing a symbolic politics approach with self-interest explanations. The public was found to support bilingual education, and express definite attitudes about it even though it was thought about in many different ways. The issue was thought about symbolically with attitudes based on feelings toward Hispanics and support for government assistance to minorities. These findings have interesting implications for future public support of programs that will increasingly be in demand within the educational system.

PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD BILINGUAL EDUCATION

Huddy, L., Cardoza, D. and Sears, D. O.

Traditionally the approach to educating children in the United States has been to use only English as the medium of instruction. However, every year thousands of children enter school with limited or no English speaking abilities, and this number will continue to increase. Bilingual education programs have been developed, and legislated for (1967 Bilingual Education Act) in response to the needs of these language minority students. The enactment of bilingual education programs represents a shift in American educational philosophy by endorsing the notion that languages other than English are valid mediums of instruction (Saville & Troike, 1971).

While bilingual education programs have some official, legislative support they are not without their critics. There exists considerable conflict about both the actual implementation of programs and their philosophical basis. Bilingual education in its simplest form refers to the use of two languages as mediums of instruction. However, programs vary tremendously in the amount and nature of teaching that occurs in the non-English language.

The philosophical thrust of programs is more frequently a major point of contention within political and more popular controversies. Bilingual education is frequently portrayed as cultural and linguistic maintenance, and this tends to frame

the argument as one between pluralism and assimilation, producing much antagonism toward bilingual education ("In Plain English," 1981; Reston, 1981; "Bilingual Education and Federal Duty," 1981; "Against a Confusion of Tongues," 1983). Implicit in much writing against bilingual education is the assumption that the majority of the American public is unsympathetic, because it violates their "melting pot" view of the United States. But is this a fair assessment of what the general public actually thinks and feels about bilingual education?

Although there has been little substantive research on public attitudes toward bilingual education, at least two recent surveys suggest that the American public generally favors bilingual education as a teaching technique (Gallup, 1980; Cole, 1983). But, there are perhaps two reasons why these reports from previous public opinion studies need to be interpreted cautiously. The first is that the American public may not have given the issue much attention or thought, and secondly, they may perceive it inaccurately.

The present study was an attempt to take a more systematic and comprehensive look at the nature of public opinion toward bilingual education of non-Hispanics residing in the United States. Of interest was not only current attitudes, but also the underlying rationale for their position.

Two current, but competing, explanations for public attitudes were compared. The notion that attitudes are based on personal experiences was investigated by looking at the impact

of having children in bilingual programs, having children in the public school system, having had experience with other languages and living in Hispanic areas. The effects of these factors was contrasted with more remote political orientations, and in particular responses to affectively loaded political symbols (Sears, Lau, Tyler & Allen, 1980; Kinder & Sears, 1981). The symbols most frequently raised with the bilingual education issue are assimilation/pluralism, assistance to minorities and political ideology. Attitudes toward government spending and language issues were also explored to determine their effects on bilingual education attitudes.

METHOD

Sampling Procedures

The majority of bilingual education programs are concerned with Hispanic children and the teaching of English and Spanish. Therefore, in addition to obtaining a representative national sample, an oversample from areas containing high concentrations of Hispanics was also drawn.

Hispanics, however, were not included in the sample because the primary purpose of the study was to examine attitudes among non-Hispanics.

Main national sample. All sampling was conducted by Market Opinion Research, a Detroit based research firm. The main sample was a national U.S. probability - proportionate-to-size (pps) household sample, consisting of 1,170 interviews.

Oversamples. Four areas with a high concentration of Hispanics were chosen. These were: (a) Miami, Florida

SMSA--Dade County; (b) Los Angeles and San Diego Counties, California; (c) New York City--Counties of the Bronx, Kings, New York, Queens and Richmond; (d) San Antonio, Texas SMSA--Counties of Bexar, Guadelope, Comal. The average number of Hispanics per 100 residents in oversampled counties was 26.3, compared to 6.4 nationally in 1980 (U.S. Census, 1980).

THE BILINGUAL EDUCATION SURVEY

The survey was designed to collect respondent's demographic characteristics, their personal experience with bilingual education and their political positions. Their stance and understanding about bilingual education and other related issues such as foreign language instruction was also assessed. The approach adopted throughout the survey was to use multiple measurements for each of the theoretical constructs thereby minimizing measurement error.

Issue Involvement

Issue involvement was measured in three different ways: (a) attention to the issue, (b) knowledge about it, and (c) degree of opinionation.

Assessment of Attitudes Toward Bilingual Education

The respondents initial attitude toward bilingual education was assessed by a series of questions pertaining to their general feelings about bilingual education, their perceptions regarding its effects and feelings about spending on bilingual programs. The respondent was also asked to provide a description of what they thought bilingual education was, and what language other than English they associated with it. Immediately

following these questions the respondents were randomly assigned to hear one of three approaches to teaching limited and non-English speaking students. The purpose of the manipulation was to present the respondents with three standardized but distinct descriptions. This enabled attitudes of people that initially knew nothing about the issue to be assessed. These brief vignettes generally corresponded to (a) a maintenance approach to dual language instruction (English and Spanish speaking students are taught in both languages), (b) a transitional approach to dual language instruction (Spanish speaking students are taught in Spanish until their English improves), and (c) an English as a second language (ESL) approach (all teaching is in English).

Personal Experience Relevant to Bilingual Education

Three areas of personal involvement were examined with regard to their possible contribution to the formation of attitudes. These were (a) the respondent's language background, (b) information pertaining to the respondent's children under 18, and (c) contact the respondent has with Hispanics.

Symbolic Predispositions

Items assessing party identification and liberalism conservatism were the standard questions used in the National Election Studies (NES, 1982). A number of subcomponents of the minorities symbol were explored. These included feelings toward Blacks and Hispanics as well as how the respondents felt about aid to minorities. A single item was used to measure the pluralism/assimilation construct. Respondents were asked

to what extent they agreed with the following statement: Immigrants to this country should be prepared to adopt the American way of life.

Related Political Issues

There were several other political issues that were explored in this survey. These included (a) government provided services, (b) school spending, (c) foreign language instruction, (d) bilingualism.

RESULTS

Initial attitudes toward bilingual education. The overall attitude measure consisted of seven items assessing the respondents general feeling toward bilingual education, their perception regarding some of its effects and their feelings about spending on bilingual programs (see Table 1). These seven items display a high degree of internal consistency (= .82), and appear to measure a single dimension of attitudes toward the issue.

As can be seen in Table 1 the public tends to be fairly favorably disposed toward bilingual education, with the means of each item falling above the scales mid-point in the positive direction. Bilingual education does not, however, conjure up the same thing for all respondents. Explanations of bilingual education fell into the following categories: (a) teaching foreign students in their own language (6% of the main sample), (b) teaching in two languages (16%), (c) teaching English to foreign students (9%), (d) general foreign language instruction (21%), (e) reference to bilingualism in general (18%) and

(f) the respondent was unable to give a description (29%). If options a, b and c are considered to be correct descriptions of bilingual education, then it should be noted that the majority of respondents could either not provide a description, or provided an inaccurate one.

Attitudes toward bilingual education are related to these understandings ($F(5, 1433) = 11.15$; $p < .01$). Respondents who thought that bilingual education was teaching foreign students in their own language had consistently less favorable attitudes than all of the other groups, while those who thought of general bilingualism had consistently more favorable attitudes (see Table 2).

Respondents' reactions to the standardized plans for bilingual education reflect a similar pattern. Cultural maintenance versions of bilingual education were reacted to much less favorably than either ESL or transitional approaches (Table 3).

Issue Involvement

We find the public claiming at least passing familiarity with the bilingual education issue (Table 4). But to gain a more discerning measure of issue involvement an issue public scale was constructed by standardizing and additively combining items. This issue public scale was split into quartiles and four issue involvement groups were created. Within each group the seven attitudinal items relevant to bilingual education were tested for the presence or absence of internal consistency as an index of non-attitudes (Achen, 1975; Barton & Parsons, 1977).

Only respondents falling into the lowest quartile of the issue public scale responded with inconsistent attitudes toward the issue. It thus seems fair to conclude that a majority of the national public have definite attitudes toward bilingual education.

Origins of Bilingual Education Attitudes

Personal experience. Of the personal experiences living in a Hispanic neighborhood, having children under 18 and current bilingualism were significantly related to attitudes. Residents of Hispanic neighborhoods were less supportive of bilingual education, bilinguals were more supportive as were parents of school age children (Table 5). Although the amount of variation explained by all personal experience variables is slight (8%).

Political Orientations

Political symbols. Racial and political symbolic attitudes are more related to attitudes toward bilingual education than personal experience factors (Table 6). The greater importance of the political symbols can be demonstrated by examining the total amount of variance accounted for by the demographic and personal experience variables presented in Table 5 (8%) and that of the political symbols presented in Table 6 (17.7%).

The most potent symbol for respondents is that associated with minorities and more specifically symbols associated with Hispanics and aid to minorities. Both pluralism and political predisposition are also associated with how respondents view the issue but to a much lesser extent. The public appears to

view bilingual education as a minorities issue. This aligns bilingual education with affirmative action kinds of issues, particularly as they affect Hispanics.

Government spending and language issues. Foreign language instruction is the issue most powerfully related to bilingual education attitudes. However, the other three issues also contribute significantly to understanding public attitudes. These effects remain even when the political symbols are statistically controlled for (Table 7). Together symbols and issues account for 36 percent of the variance in attitudes.

DISCUSSION

Contrary to statements often made in the media, the American public is not strongly opposed to bilingual education and in fact generally favors it. While the issue receives relatively little media exposure most people have attitudes about it, although public perceptions are varied and in some cases erroneous. Interestingly, only a small minority of people think of bilingual education as cultural and linguistic maintenance. When bilingual education is described in this way reactions are much less favorable. This suggests that current public support is for programs that teach language minority students to speak English.

The degree of public support for bilingual education is only minimally based on direct personal experiences. The issue is much more of a symbolic one with public reactions based on feelings toward Hispanics and government assistance to minorities generally.

Bilingual education is also seen as an educational language issue. Stances on school spending, or general bilingualism affect orientations toward bilingual education but attitudes are most strongly linked to attitudes toward teaching languages within the school system. Part of the explanation for this is that a substantial number of people think of bilingual education as synonymous with foreign language learning. When the nature of bilingual education is specified as something relevant to Hispanic children, attitudes are found to be even more strongly influenced by the minorities symbol.

These findings have important implications for the future of bilingual education programs. The current attack on affirmative action programs suggests that bilingual education could be dealt a similar blow if the issue continues to be discussed in connection with minorities. As with all public policy issues, the issue symbolism may change, particularly as there are currently so many different ways of thinking about it. This study thus provides an interesting first analysis of attitudes toward an issue that is sure to become increasingly important.

Table 1. Public support for Bilingual Education

Question	M	SD	N	Item Total correlation
Bilingual education is very successful in helping Spanish speaking students fit into American culture and the American way of life. [a]	2.98	1.00	1092	.69
Bilingual education is very unsuccessful in teaching Spanish speaking students to speak English. [a]	2.73	1.03	1076	.43
Bilingual education will greatly increase the chances of Spanish speaking students finding work once they leave school. [a]	2.73	1.02	914	.58
Bilingual education means that there would be less resources available for the education of English speaking students. [a]	2.99	1.05	1068	.34
Bilingual education would give Spanish speaking students a fair chance at receiving a quality education. [a]	2.65	.98	1022	.62
How do you feel about bilingual education? [b]	3.47	1.37	1048	.70
Do you think there is too much, too little or the right amount spent on bilingual education? [c]	2.27	.74	912	.63

Note: Means are from main sample only. The higher the number, the more positive the evaluation,

a. four point scale
b. five point scale
c. three point scale

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Table 2. Least squares means for original attitudes toward bilingual education by initial understanding

Initial Understanding	M	SE
Teaching foreign students in their own langage	$.333_a$	.060
Teaching in two languages	$.009_b$	.037
Teaching English to foreign students	$.036_b$	.049
Bilingualism	$.190_c$	.039
Foreign language instruction	$.016_b$	.035
No description	$.032_b$	.035

Note: The higher the number, the more positive the evaluation. Means that do not share a common subscript are significantly different from each other at the .01 level.

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Table 3. Means for postplan attitudes toward bilingual education by plans

Plan	M	N	SD
Maintenance	$-.157_b$	522	
Transitional	$.068_a$	515	
ESL	$.078_a$	517	

Note: The higher the number, the more positive the evaluation. Means that do not share a common subscript are significantly different from each other at the .01 level.

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Table 4. Issue public scale for the national sample

	%	M	SD	Item Total Correlation
Attention				
Thought on issue[a]		2.34	1.12	.39
Knowledge				
Provided verbal description	71.6% (838)			.46
Interviewer's rating of thoughtfulness[b]		3.1	.89	.46
Opinionation				
Number of items answered[c]		6.08	1.41	.32

Note: Oversample omitted from this table.

[a]4 point scale, 0 = none, 4 = a lot

[b]4 point scale, 1 = poorly thought out; 4 = very well thought out

[c]Values range from 0 = all items missed to; 7 = all answered

Table 5. Support for bilingual education: Demographics and personal experience as predictors

	Equation 1	Equation 2	Equation 3
	Demographics	Personal Experience	Demographics + Personal Experience
Demographics			
Age	-.20**	--	-.20**
Sex[a]	-.05*	--	-.05*
Race[b]	.11**	--	.13**
Income	-.05	--	-.04
Occupation (primary wage earner)[c]	.01	--	.01
Education	.04	--	.05
Personal Experience			
Language background Current bilingual proficiency	--	.07** (.04)	.05*
Family language background[e]	--	-.03 (-.02)	.00
Hispanic neighborhood	--	-.15** (-.14)	-.15**
Children under 18[d]	--	.02 (.04)	-.06*
R^2	.057	.023	.08

Note: Entries are beta weights (standardized regression coefficients) for each predictor variable except those in parentheses which are correlation coefficients. Variables are coded so that a positive effect of either the demographic predictors or personal experience will yield a positive beta. R^2 is adjusted for the number of variables in the analysis.

*p .05
**p .01

[a] 0 = female, 1 = male

[b] 0 = White, 1 = Black

[c] 1 = professional
2 = farm owners
3 = managers
4 = secretarial
5 = craftsmen
6 = operators
7 = service workers
8 = out of work

[d] 0 = no children under 18, 1 = have children under 18

[e] 0 = no family language background, 1 = family language background

Table 6 The effects of political symbols and government spending priorities on attitudes toward bilingual education

	Correlations		R^2
Minorities	.39	--	.151
Hispanics	.33	.20**	.111
Blacks	.15	-.02	.022
Minority Aid	.36	.22**	.126
Pluralism	.16	.11**	.026
Ideology/Party ID[a]	.21	.08**	.041
Total	--	--	.177

The entry is a standardized regression coefficient. R^2 is adjusted for number of variables in the equation.

Table 7. The relationship between bilingual education and other educational, linguistic and government services issues

					All Issues
School spending	.27**	--	--	--	.12**
Foreign language instruction	--	.51**	--	--	.42**
Bilingualism	--	--	.33**	--	.11
Government social services	--	--	--	-.28**	-.17**
R^2	.067%	.259%	.107%	.078%	.326%

Note: Entries in first 4 columns are correlation coefficients.
Entries in last column are beta weights.

p .01